

ANCIENT EGYPT – Trade

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Overview Ancient Egypt was vigorous in trade from Prehistoric times (6th millennium B.C.E.) through to the Roman Period in Egypt, in the first century B.C.E. A look at the map will suggest that trade, both by land and sea, was likely to have been both feasible and necessary--necessary because of the disproportionate amount of non arable desert land in Egypt.

The earliest period Records indicate imports of sheep and goats from Southwest Asia into prehistoric Egypt, as well as pottery from the country of Canaan. Already by the fourth millenium B.C.E. the Egyptian art of ship-bulding was developing rapidly, using planks and glued-together strips of papyrus. By the end of this pre-dynastic period the Kings of Egypt were closely supervising border crossings, where trade entered the country, and taking their share of taxable profits, on caravans entering Egypt from the desert.

The Old Kingdom (2649-2150 B.C.E.) The Old Kingdom, the first great period of pyramid construction and high social development, was marked by heavy activity along the trade routes which joined Egypt to Mesopotamia and to the Eastern Mediterranean by sea, and along the land routes leading south into Nubia and the Kingdom of Punt (probably Ethiopia). (A proto Suez Canal was In fact established across the northern desert, opening a new overland trade route as far as to the Red Sea.) From distant Afghanistan, lapis lazuli was imported regularly as a treasured adornment, while from Lebanon boatloads of cedars entered Egypt, bringing the favored material for the coffins of Pharaohs; for which commodities the Egyptians responded with heavily laden shipments of gold, silver, linen textiles. From farther south in Africa came tropical fruits, apes, monkeys, even a widely noted black dwarf, a touch of the exoticism for which the Egyptian taste grew rapidly.

Organization of Trade With the expansion of trade, in the last two millennia B.C.E., the Egyptian economy increasingly fell under governmental administrative control. By the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. the barter system, which had long dominated Egyptian trade practice, was seeing itself replaced with a standard currency, which facilitated international trading. The government took on itself the job of patrolling trade routes, assuring security for traders crossing unprotected desert tracts, and for constructing and protecting large granaries, where Egyptian farmers could store their harvests while awaiting shipment. It underscores the long enduring development of trading, in Egypt, that one lucrative job-role, throughout the major periods of Egyptian history, was that of bankrolling trading expeditions, a high stakes business venture which could win big, or prove costly if shiploads were pirated or caravans waylaid.

Readings

Zvelebi, M. ed., *Hunters in Transition: Mesolithic Societies and the Transition to Farming*, Cambridge, 1986.

Bellwood, P., *First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Society*, Malden (Mass.), 2005.

Discussion questions

What was the state of trade *within* Egypt? Was it as active as international trade? How did traded goods move within the country?

What kind of trading caravans did the Egyptians employ, to import and export across the Sahara desert? Were there 'authorized' trading routes, followed by all traders?

In the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C.E. the Athenians traded many wine and oil products with Egypt, across the eastern Mediterranean. What did the Egyptians trade back to the Athenians in return?